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## Wall-Paper-Plant

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# Wall-Paper-Plant

Putting Agential Realism into Practice

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Laura Donkers

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## Putting Agential Realism into Practice

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### Abstract

Rather like Barad's scientists we, as artists, are part of the apparatus of the experiment. Effecting the agential cut by laying the paper down to start the work. Making a mark, the mark, which simultaneously creates and reveals. Yielding to the limitations and the revelation that comes with that act to find the marks that can be made. Sometimes something pokes through, interrupting. Yet it is not about being limited, it is about discovering how to get the most out of the apparatus; it is a dialogue that reveals possibility and being within the journey of exploration, discovery, and revelation.

### Biography

Laura Donkers is an environmental artist, and Doctoral candidate at Dundee University, living and working in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. Her practice-led research explores the 'act of dwelling' and how art can expand ways to reflect on and develop our lived experience. Forming around concerns that as lives become increasingly encoded and intellectually based so there are less and less opportunities to directly connect with the places where we live. To advance this idea she uses 'field research' processes of drawing, fieldwalking, and digital recording, to collect and present the primary observation.

# Wall-Paper-Plant

## Putting Agential Realism into Practice

It's something I struggle with – being awe struck by the landscape. I live on an island, North Uist, in the Outer Hebrides: A place where you can see 360 degrees from just about anywhere. And not only do you see the land and water around you but also the neighbouring islands, and the seas that define boundaries. The Atlantic stretching out to the land you imagine lying on the other side. My vision is dominated by the power of the peripheral, the exterior that enfolds.

I have recently returned from being artist-in-residence at DRAW International in Caylus, a 13<sup>th</sup> Century mediaeval village in the Midi Pyrenees region of Southern France: Hilly, forested, dairy farming, green. A village nestled in the hills, built out of the rocks and trees. A community implanted in its landscape.

My encounter with this place was the overwhelming sense of fullness – woodlands, cliffs, fields, fruit trees dripping with plums and figs. How can one capture this fullness, this brimming over? I need to know what I am looking at – to be able to take a piece / make a frame / effect a 'cut' between what is to be included or excluded from my consideration.

So this is where I read Barad's texts and considered what being in the world, being part of the world, and being affected by and affecting the world might mean to me as a visitor

to this place, as I tramped the footpaths through the hills, oak woods, limestone cliffs, fields and farmyards. Being within the space.

Barad says:

“...It’s not about solving paradoxes or synthesizing different points of view from the outside ... but rather about the intra-implication of putting “oneself”, one’s ideas, one’s dreams, all the different ways of touching, and being in touch, and sensing the differences and entanglements from within.”<sup>1</sup>

My practice explores the ‘act of dwelling’ through the political, physical and material conditions of landscape as experienced through the body. Forming around concerns that as lives become increasingly encoded and intellectually based so there are less and less opportunities to directly connect with the places where we live. I use ‘field research’ processes of drawing, fieldwalking, and digital recording, to collect and present the primary observation. However in practice I find that much seems to get lost in the translation from ‘fieldwork’ to artwork, so it is also about exploring the ambiguous space between language and it’s ability to communicate clearly or truthfully.

I was in France to draw. My aim was to focus on the practice of ‘blind contour drawing’<sup>2</sup> for it’s ability to defy the analytical mind and create an image that emerges from the

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<sup>1</sup> Klein, A. (2012). Mousse 34 - Karan Barad *Intra-Actions*. *Mousse Magazine (Milan) Interview*

<sup>2</sup> A practice introduced by Kimon Nicolaïdes, *The Natural Way to Draw*, where the artist maintains their gaze on the subject as they draw without looking at the marks they have made

intra-action of embodied observation: where the eyes feel their way across the subject and the hand directly expresses that sense in a drawn, responsive mark. I needed a way to directly engage with the matter of this place and I came to explore the method of frottage<sup>3</sup>, which extends the state of ‘blindness’ as the paper conceals the surface until the pastel or graphite reveals the texture beneath, as it is rubbed across the paper in human/non-human intra-action. A process of connecting to the external world in a primary engagement – to come to know the “objects” first and what I might think about them second.

I performed the *agential cut* by laying thin sheets of Japanese Gampi paper down onto the earth, rock, tree, cliff, and recorded matter. Temporarily separating them from their interconnectedness with everything else in order to see and come to know them. I adjusted my method of using materials, accepting when the matter beneath the paper would break through and inform this process of discovery.

I trust my instinct, and stop and make a drawing here. What is it that attracted me? What did I see? Looking at it as a space, so often it seems quite unpromising, bland. But I have decided to stop, and lay down the paper, started to make marks, so I’ll carry on. Perhaps I could put the paper almost anywhere – what I will reveal is What Is There. Simply that – what is there, to be seen, to feel, to show. Enhancing our communication and our relationship with the human and non-human world. Responding through touch rather than through a lens or a screen, all wrapped up. The work is created in the

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<sup>3</sup> Frottage – an automatic method of creation developed by Max Ernst that reproduces surfaces in an aleatoric and random way

relationship between seeing, making, material and thinking. It happens as you walk along, and decide to stop there. You have seen it in a second. That seeing is a learnt experience, an embodied knowledge of what a work needs to contain for you. A knowledge that you bring with you to the act of making: Things fall into place through the matter that you respond to. The ideas come later.

As I made these drawings I would discover how something insignificant and unseen like a little twig could form hard lines across the work. The pastel would pick up the presence of the twig and make a clear smooth line. Yet other times it would instead make holes every so often. And then I would realise that some benign twigs had thorns. Instead of thinking 'Oh how annoying that this twig keeps making holes in my paper' I came instead to think 'ah, this twig has thorns', as it formed a series of little tears in the paper that marked its presence in the work and in the world.

These are not compositions in the sense of the artist's eye composing and judging the value of the scene by removing annoying elements that may impede success. I needed only to lay my paper there and start drawing. Because what guides progress is the way you use the apparatus to continually respond, and engage with the substance of the place, the surface, and how we can adjust our gaze, and our perspective only when we are caught up in the engagement.

I think too often we repeat ways of working as a definition of skill and knowledge, but it felt good to be a stranger in a foreign land exploring my practice, discovering new marks and ways of making. These are the surfaces. This is the substance of this place. And as

I actively work with it I find it through direct touch: blind engagement that slowly reveals itself as the drawing progresses. Barad refers to this process in her reference to the scientist being part of the apparatus, and how he needs to understand that in order to make scientific work more accurate and more rigorous.

It is uncomfortable making drawings like this – half way up a cliff or in caves underneath the trees, balancing. Barad talks about developing a relationship where you are not in charge. "... a matter of inviting, welcoming, and enabling the response of the Other."<sup>4</sup> You are not the lead. You just take a step forward, and discover what bounties can be revealed beneath your fingertips by reaching out.

Agential realism seems familiar to me. Maybe my experience of life has been relational. Living in a rural situation you are constantly required to understand that you must bend. The climate, force of nature, season will get you to bend, to yield. In a place of doing, of action, of learning through doing you employ agency, build protection, you find ways to resist, and outwit. You are in a relationship, a 'discursive practice', responding to, adapting and creating new engagements. You get bent and pushed by the environment and in responding become part of that environment. 'Reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenemona but "things"-in-phenomena.'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> ibid Klein, A. (2012). Mousse 34 - Karan Barad *Intra-Actions*. *Mousse Magazine (Milan) Interview*

<sup>5</sup> Barad, K. (2003). Signs. *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*, 801 - 831.



With this method I can draw everything. I can draw the leaves, the little stones, the rock face, and the tree. It is a tender and responsive way of working that enables so much to be revealed. The marks that you make are the marks that you can make – within the scope of the materials that you have decided to use and in the context of the place where you are working. Responding as you push with the charcoal, graphite or pastel. Sometimes something pokes through. It interrupts what you would want to do. But you did not know what you wanted to do. You are exploring possibility. You gain knowledge of possibility within the limitations that you have given yourself, but also discover what is possible by using that method. So it is not about being limited, it is about the dialogue of exploring how to get the most out of that apparatus.

Like Barad's scientists we, as artists, are part of the experiment. Effecting the agential cut by laying the paper down to start the work. Making a mark, the mark, which simultaneously creates and reveals. Yielding to the limitations and the revelation that comes with that act to find the marks that can be made. Sometimes something pokes through, interrupting. Yet it is not about being limited, it is about discovering how to get the most out of the apparatus; it is a dialogue that reveals possibility and being within the journey of exploration, discovery, and revelation.

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